

NEW JERSEY EDUCATION
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THE NEED FOR STATEWIDE
GRADUATION STANDARDS:

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STATEWIDE GRADUATION STANDARDS

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There are three bills presently being considered by the New Jersey Legislature that would establish a program of graduation standards for secondary school students. The possibility that New Jersey may develop and implement Statewide standards of pupil proficiency for high school graduates has already triggered heavy debate. Those who support graduation standards feel that minimum proficiency levels are an integral part of the concept of a thorough and efficient education. The opponents of graduation standards insist that minimum proficiency levels are punitive, in practice do more damage than good to students, and will result in nothing less than social chaos.

One argument that is used most often against graduation standards focuses on urban and minority youth. Large numbers of minority youth are expected to fail the proficiency test and thereby become ineligible for an academic diploma. The recent experience in Florida and the subsequent lawsuit filed by the N.A.A.C.P. are cited as sufficient reason not to establish graduation standards. However, what happened in Florida was the result of some circumstances that are unique to Florida and not relevant to New Jersey.

It is maintained by some that a high school diploma is a reward that should be granted to every student who spends the required amount of time in secondary school and that numerical and letter grades, rather than proficiency tests, are sufficient indicators of competency. Statewide proficiency standards, it is argued, will penalize the student who diligently "did his time" by identifying that he either succeeded or failed to achieve minimum competency in the basic skills.

Among some observers the preceeding argument is extended to conclude that proficiency testing and graduation standards are inherently racist because large numbers of minority students fail to exceed the standard. One of the underlying assumptions of this position appears to be that most minority students are incapable of passing minimum proficiency tests in the basic skills. If this is the case, the position that argues against standards because many minorities are bound to fail may in fact be more firmly rooted in racism than the position that champions standards.

If the argument against graduation standards assumes that large numbers of minority students will fail because they lack inherent ability, it is racist and therein undesirable. If, on the other hand, the argument against graduation standards assumes that large numbers of minority students will fail because the school systems they are forced to attend are inefficient and unable to provide an adequate education, the argument becomes misdirected as well as irrelevant because it protects school systems rather than students. The real issue is whether school systems will continue to be rewarded for failing to educate by being allowed to award diplomas that bear no relation to competence and proficiency or whether students have the right to a document that relates their effort and achievement as well as the quality of their educational system, to a uniform Statewide standard.

One of the most serious shortcomings of the argument cited above is that it ignores the manner in which the current "academically neutral" diploma penalizes the proficient minority student. Despite allegations to the contrary, students are currently labeled or stigmatized by the school system they attend in the community where they reside. A diploma that certifies a student has achieved minimum

competency would at the very least require prospective employers, educational institutions, and post secondary training programs to individualize the specific student rather than make judgments based on a school district's or community's reputation.

Graduation standards, as long as they involve early assessment and the identification and remediation of skills deficits will do more to aid the student who falls below the minimum proficiency level than the current system. The most profound effect of the standards should be on all levels of educational staff, who will have to explain and account for the outcome of their efforts. If non-school related problems are the cause, they will be identified. If the cause of the problem lies within the educational system, that also will become apparent.

An important issue here is whether or not the high school diploma should have some real significance, whether students, parents, and the society at large are entitled to know that a particular type of diploma is a certification that the bearer has achieved minimal competency in the basic academic skills necessary to function successfully as an adult.

One of the dire predictions that has been made is that the dropout rate will mushroom: that students faced with the frustration and disappointment of having failed the proficiency test will leave school rather than work harder to pass the proficiency test at a later date. Actually, there is very little, if any, hard evidence to suggest that this will occur. In fact, the reverse could happen. Early assessment along with mandated remediation could become encouragement enough for a potential dropout to remain in school, especially if the diploma they could earn certified mastery of the basic skills. But this also is pure speculation, which like its opposing argument lacks the hard evidence that would make it credible.

In 1968, a graduation standards program was initiated in the Denver, Colorado public schools. The Denver program featured early assessment in the ninth grade and emphasized diagnosis and effective remediation. The graduation standards program did not result in an increased dropout rate. Denver's Administrative Director for Secondary Education stated that "no drastic increase in the dropout rate occurred" and that "dropout rate increases have never been related or connected to the graduation standards program". Denver's graduation standards program has been in operation for ten years.

Another argument against graduation standards maintains that proficiency standards are useless because there are far fewer job openings in the State than there are high school graduates, i.e., not everyone needs to be minimally proficient if only a chosen few will eventually gain employment, or the job market in their community is depressed. This argument ties graduation standards to the availability of jobs in the immediate locality or State. It overlooks the fact that the graduate might choose to relocate to another community, state, or section of the Country, and in doing so need to be minimally competent in order to compete in the broader labor market. This argument also implies that short term considerations in the aggregate economy should be the basis for the acceptance or rejection of competency standards for high school graduates and this implication would certainly appear to be inconsistent with the theory and practice of a thorough and efficient education.

The bottom line of the argument against graduation standards is that the standards will "hurt" students: some will invariably be denied academic diplomas. This argument is supposedly rooted in a perversion of "humanistic psychology" that strives for a society without failure where standards as "standards" do not exist. In addition to being totally unrealistic, this argument sidesteps a critical question:

What greater "hurt" can there be if one lacks the minimal skills necessary to lead a productive adult life? If a student leaves school unable to read, compute, or adequately express himself in writing; how can graduation standards or a non-academic diploma hurt or damage him any more than his unskilled condition?

Statewide graduation standards are a necessity. The student who achieves or surpasses the standard will earn title to an objective indicator of his proficiency in the basic skills. The student who fails to achieve the standard should become the recipient of adequate comprehensive diagnostic and remedial services.

Both of the Assembly bills that concern graduation standards are unacceptable in their present form and could be damaging to large numbers of students. Bills A-335 and A-780 are too limited: They merely mandate Statewide standards and an exit test. These bills lack the two essential components of an equitable and efficient program of graduation standards: early assessment and corrective remediation.

Senate bill S-1154 is a much more comprehensive and equitable plan. Early assessment, diagnosis, and corrective remediation are integral components of the proposed program of graduation standards. The bill also does not deny students a high school diploma, it proposes different types of diploma levels based on one's proficiency in the basic skills.

The one shortcoming in the Bill is the weak statement regarding the relationship of the Commissioner of Education to local school districts (page 2, lines 16-19). This section should be revised to permit a much stronger role for the State Department of Education in regard to monitoring and providing assistance to local school districts. Assistance to local districts should automatically be provided by the

State Department of Education when a specific percentage of graduates fail to pass the Statewide graduation test, and this provision should be written into the legislation.

The effect of a provision that mandated technical assistance from the State Department of Education would be positive. Both the Department and the local districts in question would have to address the problem of unacceptable proficiency levels. The absence of an automatic technical assistance provision in S-1154 seriously weakens the Bill. Mandated standards should be supported and reinforced by mandated technical assistance rather than have the Department of Education's role and responsibility influenced and diluted by the effect of interest group politics during the process of drafting an administrative code.

It is recommended that lines 16-19 on page 2 be revised similar to the following statement:

The Commissioner of education shall, upon request of the local board or upon the failure of a school district to graduate a specified percentage of pupils who meet State graduation standards, as determined by the Commissioner, provide such technical assistance and oversight as may be necessary to aid a district in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the educational program in which those students who do not achieve the Statewide minimum graduation standard are enrolled.

S-1154 amended as recommended above would be consistent with the intent of the "thorough and efficient" provision in the New Jersey constitution. S-1154 in its present form falls short of insuring as much as possible that the proposed program of graduation standards will be equitable and efficient.

It must be stressed that the proposed legislation is the first step in the process of establishing graduation standards, nothing more or nothing less. Whether

or not the program will be a success will depend on other factors such as the level at which standards are set, the reliability and validity of the assessment test, the extent that diagnosis and remediation are emphasized, the adequacy of resources of the local school district, and the willingness of the State Department of Education to provide the necessary leadership, direction, and technical expertise.

We encourage the Senate Education Committee to approve the bill with the modifications previously cited and hope the legislature will enact it into law. Once that is done, however, there are a number of pitfalls that need to be avoided.

The graduation standards, the minimal acceptable level of proficiency, must be set at a meaningful level. If the standards are too low, all of the activities and processes associated with the program will have been an exercise in futility: nothing will have changed. The graduation standards program must be tied to effective diagnosis and remediation. To do less is to penalize the student, to blame the victim. To accomplish this, the State Department of Education will have to resist interest group politics and base their decisions and behavior on a foundation of solid professionalism. Lastly, local districts must have adequate resources, both fiscal and professional. The resource disparities among districts must be corrected if meaningful change is to occur.

S-1154, with the modifications that we recommend will neither create nor avoid the pitfalls cited above. That is not the purpose of any legislative act. S-1154 is a necessary, but not a sufficient step in the right direction. Graduation standards are an essential component in a "thorough and efficient education.